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ABSTRACT

Modern linguistic theory offers two main contributions to the improvement of writing: readability and appropriateness. Readability can be developed by improving the correctness of forms used and achieved by carrying out an error analysis on the student's writing to provide insights into errors and clause structure. Linguists have determined that errors may be grouped in two broad classes: mistakes, breakdowns in performance not attributable to competence deficiencies; and defects in competence, correctable by means of a learning program. Students should be helped toward the achievement of "syntactic maturity," exhibiting a wide variety of stylistic devices. Appropriateness, or good style, arises out of a careful consideration of subject, purpose, and audience. Student writing behavior is best changed when passive knowledge, or "competence," is increased and transferred to writing behavior, or "performance." (DF)

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A PRIMER IN DESCRIPTIVE GRAMMARS: What's Worth Knowing?

Structural and Transformational Grammar: Performance and Competence

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What's worth knowing? A difficult question to answer. Personally, I believe that every teacher of composition should be familiar with at least one of the modern linguistic descriptions of English. Those who have had no formal training in linguistics would be well advised to carefully study Stageberg (1977). This text presents a detailed description of English from the structuralist viewpoint and provides a quite satisfactory introduction to the principles of transformational grammar.

My present topic concerns the concepts of performance and competence as they relate to the teaching of composition. Performance, as defined by modern linguists, refers to actual language behavior, to language use in speech or writing. Competence refers to our unconscious knowledge of the rules of language, knowledge that makes possible the formulation and interpretation of an infinite number of sentences. Let me quickly point out that the term "rules" as used here is not synonymous with the term as used by the prescriptivist traditional grammarians. Rules in modern linguistic theory are those patterns and processes which govern the production and comprehension of utterances.

Both structuralists and transformationalists provide a description of the English language. Structuralists describe language performance, language which has actually been produced. Initially, structuralists were only interested in oral language, but as time went on, they did apply their analysis to written sentences. Transformational grammar describes native-speaker competence. Transformationalists attempt to make our intuitive knowledge of language structure conscious through a process of introspection. Having done so, they attempt to

formulate an explicit description of this knowledge using abstract symbols and formulae.

The implication of these concepts for teachers of composition is that if we wish to improve writing behavior, i.e., change student performance, we will have to do something to bring about a change in student competence.

Before I suggest ways in which we might do this, I would like to focus on some of the assumptions which underlie any program in composition. First, we assume that some writing is better than other writing and that compositon teachers know the difference. We do not hesitate to make judgments about the quality of writing produced by our students. Second, we assume that the students in our composition classes are somehow deficient in their writing skills. If we did not believe this, we would not require them to take Freshman Composition. Third, we assume that intervention on the part of the composition instructor will lead to improved student writing. In short, we believe that writing is a skill that can be learned. It is important to bear these assumptions in mind as we consider ways to improve writing because they and they alone justify what we do in composition classes.

I believe that modern linguistics offers two main contributions to the improvement of writing. In making this statement, I assume that the two major instructional goals of composition courses are increases in readability and appropriateness. By readability I mean those characteristics which encourage the reader to pursue the text to conclusion: interest, intelligibility and closure. By appropriateness I mean suiting the style to the narrator, to the subject and purpose and to the audience. (See Malmstrom and Weaver, 1973 p. 290).

On the one hand, we can increase readability by improving the correctness of forms used. The most effective way to do this is by carrying out an error analysis on the students' writing. I will discuss this process below. Readability can also be increased by improving the syntactic maturity of the composition. To accomplish this, the instructor will need to engage in clause analysis with the students using both selected model texts and the students' writing samples. Both syntactic maturity and correctness can lead to increased appropriateness though, as I will indicate momentarily, this is not necessarily the case.

Prior to discussing error analysis, let me point out that I am assuming that before the instructor engages in any consideration of student errors, (s)he will be quite satisfied that the student has already produced a worthwhile text in terms of content. In short, it is futile to be concerned about form if the writer has nothing of interest to say.

In dealing with errors, or "unwanted forms" as H.V. George calls them, the composition instructor should be aware that not all errors are produced by the same causes. Linguists have noted that errors may be grouped in two broad classes. Errors of the first type, or "mistakes" as they are called, are due to breakdowns in performance. They are caused by such things as carelessness, forgetfulness, physical or mental fatigue, emotional stress and the like. When these errors are pointed out to the student, they are generally self-corrected immediately. No further intervention on the part of the instructor is necessary. To eliminate or reduce these errors in the final draft, the instructor should encourage the student to engage in careful proofreading. We must bear in mind, however, that proofreading itself is a skill which must be learned in order to be effective.

All other errors may be said to be caused by defects in competence. Deficiencies are due to non-existent, inadequate or incomplete prior learning. In order to eliminate these deficiencies and the resulting errors, the instructor must set up a learning program to insure that the correct forms can be acquired.

The second realization that the composition instructor should possess is that not all errors are equal in importance. It is possible to establish a two-way hierarchy of errors. On one dimension we can classify errors into four broad categories: errors in graphic conventions, errors in syntax, errors in semantics, and errors in stylistics (see Appendix A). Most composition instructors feel that errors involving stylistics, or composition errors, are of far greater importance than errors involving graphic conventions, or mechanics.

The second dimension of the hierarchy is an internal one, for errors in each category may be priority-ranked according to their relative importance. Appendix A contains lists of representative types of each category of error. The purpose of identifying, classifying and ranking student errors is to enable the composition instructor to select a few of the most important errors for remediation. In this way, the student can proceed to greater mastery of correct forms in an orderly and reasonable fashion without being confronted with the frustration of a "corrected" composition wherein all errors have been indiscriminately noted with no reference made to their relative importance.

Once we have carried out an error analysis of our students' writing and planned

remedial activities based on selected errors, we will probably want to take steps to improve the overall readability of the compositions by increasing sentence variety. One approach which has been frequently used focuses on basic sentence types. (See Appendix B for samples according to three linguistic descriptions.) Several studies have been done to determine the effectiveness of this method. (See Arena, 1975).

In these studies, writing samples from published texts were analyzed for the percentage of each basic sentence type. Student production was then measured against the professional "norm". However, in spite of the claims made, I do not believe it is useful to focus on basic sentence types for the simple reason that basic sentence type is determined by semantic factors and not by stylistic considerations. Therefore, it does not seem reasonable to ask students to produce, say, 60% transitive clauses, 30% intransitive clauses, and 10% equational clauses when the sentence types they produce will be determined of necessity by the message they wish to convey.

A more productive approach, it seems to me, is to help students achieve what is known as "syntactic maturity".* Syntactic maturity is a concept which is also based on the analysis of so-called "mature" writing. In some cases the writing was done by older students; in others it was done by professionals. Several discussions of this concept appear in the literature regarding the teaching of

*Professor Tom Newkirk has pointed out that syntactic maturity is a loaded term in that "maturity" carries with it the notion of a value judgment. He prefers, and I concur in this preference, the more neutral term "syntactic complexity" suggested by Marian Crowhurst in a recent issue of English Education.

composition. Kellogg Hunt (1964) says that the best indicator of syntactic maturity is the length of the minimum terminable unit or T-unit. A T-unit is defined as one main clause and whatever full or reduced clauses are embedded within it. According to Hunt, the longer the T-unit, the more mature the writing.

The second best indicator, claims Hunt, is clause length. The third, the number of clauses per T-unit . Lastly, total sentence length.

Francis Christensen (1967) adds to these characteristics of syntactic maturity the notion of "free modifiers", such structures as movable adverbials, absolutes and non-restrictive adjectivalizations. Christensen claims that syntactically mature writers use a high percentage of free modifiers, and they also tend to use "cumulative" sentences, ones in which most free modifiers occur in final position. Further, Christensen states that syntactically mature writing is clear writing.

Bivens (1974) asserts that syntactically mature writers use a high percentage of complex sentences. Thus they eliminate choppiness by combining short sentences while at the same time reducing redundant syntactic material. Thus it would seem that if composition instructors wish to contribute to improved syntactic complexity of student writing, there is a need to show students how to increase sentence length by adding free modifiers and by embedding dependent clauses.

Linguistics, then, can help the composition instructor improve readability and appropriateness in student writing by providing insights into student errors and into the structure of clauses. Through error analysis and clause analysis the instructor can construct learning activities designed to bring about changed writing behavior (performance) through a change in competence.

As mentioned earlier, however, we need to consider more in depth the concept of appropriateness. While it is possible to objectively evaluate correctness using standard English as a model, appropriateness is always a subjective evaluation though composition instructors may agree on some shared norms.

There are many factors involved in a determination of appropriateness. Though many writers argue for syntactic maturity, as Malmstrom and Weaver (1973) point out, syntactically mature sentences are not always appropriate. Christensen argues for clarity, but syntactically mature sentences are not always clear. Malmstrom and Weaver cite passages from Faulkner's The Bear in which countless dependent clauses are embedded into the matrix sentence making interpretation quite difficult. Few would claim that Faulkner did not produce "good" writing. Therefore, clear writing is not necessarily good, at least in fiction. Correctness and readability may also be inappropriate under certain circumstances. The crux of the matter seems to be a careful consideration of subject, purpose and audience. This, say Malmstrom and Weaver, will produce a good style. Regarding audience, it should be pointed out that many students are unaware of the nature of register or keys. They may have unconsciously learned to vary their level of formality in speech according to the context, but often they do not realize that spoken and written keys differ considerably. As a result, many students, when composing, will simply transcribe utterances which they might use in informal conversation. Consequently, students need to be shown how speech and writing differ in terms of register and how register should be varied according to intended audience.

As we work with students to help them improve their writing performance, we need to clearly identify for them the tasks to be performed by making as objective a description of the activity as possible. It is also advisable to give a narrow assignment both to help the student focus on the task and to help the instructor evaluate the degree to which the objectives have been met. By narrow assignment I am referring strictly to form, not to content. As stated earlier, I assume all

Questions of content have been dealt with before sentence structure comes under analysis.

Students need to know why they should change their writing behavior. As part of the rationale, the instructor can show them the effects of stylistic variation by requiring silent and oral reading of selected model texts. These readings should be followed up by a discussion aimed at bringing into conscious focus both the effects of the writing upon the reader and the stylistic devices which produced the effects.

Students also need to know how to produce the kind of composition which the instructor expects. Here, a program of remediation based on error analysis should lead to improved "correctness". To increase syntactic complexity, the instructor can expose students to a wide variety of stylistic devices by using professional writing samples.

Also, the instructor can teach students how to do a clause analysis both of student writing and of the model texts. By focusing on function only, students will come to see how words, phrases and clauses serve as modifiers and how, as movable units, they may be used to vary sentence structure.

Throughout this process, the instructor must recognize that students already "know" much of the grammar which must be applied in stylistic variation. The task is to get the students to make this passive knowledge (competence) become part of their writing behavior (performance).

In sum, the composition instructor's overriding goal should be to give the students the same flexibility enjoyed by professional writers. Only by increasing student competence through an objectively organized program can we bring about a meaningful change in student performance.

If we have provided the options necessary to produce appropriate writing under any circumstance, then we can truly say that our students have gained the flexibility necessary to be good writers.

APPENDIX A

Structural and Transformational Grammar: Performance and Competence

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CLASSIFICATION OF COMPOSITION ERRORS

Errors Involving Graphic Conventions	Errors Involving Syntax	Errors Involving Semantics	Errors Involving Style
(standard usage, prescriptive rules, mechanics)	lack of agreement number, subject-verb, etc.	(all levels)	(Composition errors)
abbreviations	improper case	ambiguity	'choppy' sentences
numerals	dangling modifiers	lack of coherence	details lacking
capitals	sentence fragments	improper word choice	too much/little emphasis
italics-underlining	non-parallelism	missing definition	examples lacking
punctuation	faulty subordination	unclear reference	generalities vs. specifics
spelling	tense shifts	faulty derivation	awkwardness
quotation marks	poor coordination		poor organization
	confusion of adjectives and adverbs		unclear point of view
	incorrect use of articles		questionable relevance
			repetition
			faulty transition
			lack of sentence variety
			wordiness
			poor paragraph construction

APPENDIX B

DESCRIPTIVE GRAMMARS: What's Worth Knowing?

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Sentence Types

Basic Sentence Patterns (Structuralist)

N be adj	The food is good
N be UW	I am here
N_1 be N_1	John is a professor
NV_1	John sleeps
$N_1V_2N_2$	John sees Mary
$N_1V_2N_2N_3$	John gives Mary the book
$N_1V_2N_2N_2$	The Club elected John president
N LV adj	Mary seems ill.
N_1LVN_1	John became a lawyer

Kernel Sentences (Transformationalist)

NP + be + substantive	John is a professor
NP + be + Adv. (place)	I am here
NP + V	John sleeps
NP + V_t + NP	John sees Mary
NP + $V\bar{b}$ + substantive	John became a lawyer
NP + Vs + Adj.	Mary seems ill
NP + Vh + NP	The book weighs ten pounds

Clause patterns (tagmemics)

transitive = +S: N+P: +V+O: N^{+}O: N

John sees Mary
John gives Mary the book

intransitive + +S: N+P: IV

John sleeps

equational = +S: N+P: eqv + PA: N/Aj/AV

John is a professor
The food is good
I am here
Mary seems ill
John became a lawyer

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